ABIDING
May 18, 2003

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 22:25–31
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–11

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."
1 John 4:16 (NRSV)

"Abide in me as I abide in you." John 15:4 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your love. And open our hearts and our minds to your word, that hearing we might believe, and believing, trust you with our lives, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

At the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway's great novel about the Spanish Civil War, the central character of the book, Robert Jordan, has been mortally wounded. Maria, the woman he loves, wants to stay with him and die beside him. It's one of those scenes that burns itself into your memory—particularly the motion picture portrayal. Gary Cooper, I recall, played Jordan, and Ingrid Bergman was Maria. Maria wants to stay. Jordan wants her to go on and live. And one of the striking things about the scene is the way Hemingway, in the middle of it, starts to sound exactly like the Bible, the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John to be exact, the "Abide in me as I abide in you" passage.

> "Now you will go for us both," Jordan says. "You must do your duty now. . . . Now you are going well and fast and far and we both go in thee. Not me but us both. The me in thee. Now you go for us both. Truly. We both go in thee now."
>
> Maria starts to go but stops and looks back. "Roberto. . . . Let me stay."
>
> "I am with thee now," Jordan shouts. "We are both there. Go.!"

And she goes and Jordan dies, and it is quite a scene with not a dry eye in the house. (See Frederick Buechner, *The Me in Thee: The Magnificent Defeat.*)

I think about it, I confess—Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman—every time I read or hear the words of Jesus in the fifiteenth chapter of the Gospel of John.

> Abide in me as I abide in you.
> I am the vine, you are the branches
> As the Father has loved me,
> So I have loved you:
> Abide in my love.

And also similar words in the First Letter of John at the end of the New Testament: “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

I don’t know whether Hemingway intended to suggest that his readers think about the Gospel of John, but I can’t imagine that the thematic similarities are accidental: the power of love; the power of one person’s love to go on existing in the lives and love of others even after the person is gone; the mystical power of love to live, to abide in our lives and loves, the ultimate reality that overcomes even death, even our own death; the loving heart, in Mr. Rogers’s wonderful affirmation, that lies at the very center of the universe.

The biblical context is, in fact, Hemingway-esque. Jesus is speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper. His death is looming.

> I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.
> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.

It’s a remarkable affirmation when you think about it.

The context for the words from the First Letter of John is similar. It has been suggested that the author is very old at the time he is writing; if it is John the apostle, he is perhaps the last person alive actually to have known Jesus, talked with him, received the bread and wine from his own hands. And so for him, it is also a kind of summing up and a direction into the future.

> God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.

There is a lot of “abiding” in these passages, a lot of Jesus living on in the lives and loves of his followers.

There is a very critical and radical new theology here. God is love. There were, and are, plenty of other theologies: God is power. God is

righteousness. God is judge. God is creator. God is king. All of it an attempt to capture the ultimate reality of God in human words, categories, metaphors. And here an elegantly simple, incredibly powerful new thought: God is love. And its corollary: since God is love, God lives in us as we love others. That's quite a challenge. The reality of God living in your love.

Joanna reminded us last week that it was probably the first Bible verse many of us learned in Sunday school: "God is love." The temptation, because those words are so familiar, is to be glib, to hear them without understanding, to say them without their having any impact on the way we think and behave. And beyond that, the temptation whenever we think about love is to limit its meaning to the sentimental feelings of affection we have on occasion. But this love the New Testament keeps talking about is not sentimental at all. It's not ethereal. It's not even an emotion. It's an act, a gift, a person—God's only Son, Jesus Christ. When the New Testament talks about love, it means Jesus Christ, and its symbol is not hearts and flowers; it's a cross. Nothing wrong with hearts and flowers and romance, of course. It's just not the totality of what Christians mean by love.

Real love in marriage, Frederick Buechner says somewhere, is not the feelings we have during the marriage ceremony or at a romantic, candlelight dinner for two. Real love comes into play when the sink is full of dirty dishes and the bills haven't been paid and it's 2:00 a.m. and the baby starts crying and someone has to get up and change a diaper and your spouse has a head cold and you really don't want to get out of bed. Real love in human relationships is not so much about emotions and feelings at all but loving acts, behavior shaped and formed not by my needs, my priorities, my desires, but by love's imperative, love—for those of us who claim the name Christian—defined not by Hollywood, not by the culture, but by God's only Son, Jesus Christ.

What could that mean beyond the perimeters of our personal relationships? Are there social and political implications, international implications even?

University of Chicago professor and distinguished scholar Jean Bethke Elshtain is thinking a lot these days about the international and geopolitical implications of Christian love. In a provocative new book *Just War Against Terror*, she recalls that it was the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who broke ranks with the mindset of the majority of religious leaders during the 1930s, a mindset that was pacifism—or at least nonviolence—and suggested that because Christian love translates into justice in the political arena, it was an expression of love to militarily oppose the Nazi movement. "Christian realism" he called it, and he said that to express God's love in the real world is to risk getting your hands dirty. Likewise Elshtain argues that it is precisely Christian love that requires the taking up of arms on behalf of the innocent and weak and

powerless who are being oppressed and harmed and killed. She references the terrible massacres in Rwanda and Bosnia and Kosovo, which were, at first, mostly ignored. It's precisely Christian love that requires a firm and vigorous response to the kind of terrorism that takes innocent lives in random acts of violence. And while we may disagree on specific strategies, I have to say that I am compelled by her argument.

It is axiomatic, in the thought of John the Gospel writer, that love is at the heart of reality, the center of the universe. When you peel back all the layers, at the heart of things is not a powerful angry judge, not a vacuum, an empty space. God, John proposes, is love. And you abide in God, and God abides in you insofar as you allow the love that God is to live in and through you.

How is it, when this is so simple and clear, that religion can be so hateful? And I call on the recent testimony of a new authority in Chicago, Cubs manager, Dusty Baker. I know there are many reasons not to, but I cannot help adding, the first-place Chicago Cubs. In any event, the *Tribune* reported on Dusty Baker's introduction to the legendary local rivalry here in Chicago between Cubs and White Sox fans. It seems that Baker was out on the town with a friend, and they were sitting at a bar musing on the possibility, albeit remote, of a Cubs–Sox World Series (an event that last happened in 1906: the Sox won 4 games to 2). Baker said he was pulling for the Sox to win the American League pennant. The bar tender overheard the conversation and interrupted and said "You can't do that! You either love the Cubs and hate the Sox, or you love the Sox and hate the Cubs. But you can't do both." And Dusty Baker said, "I'm not into that. . . . I can't get that deep where I love one team so much that I hate the other." Now there's a New Testament statement for you.

Old John put it bluntly: "Those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars." No ambiguity there.

But sometimes something happens to the basic shape of religion, and instead of a system of thinking and living and relating that proclaims God's love for the whole creation and all its people and thus builds up the human community, it does something like the exact opposite: turns into a system by which the community is divided and others are excluded, barriers and boundaries are carefully drawn. It can happen in any religion and frequently does. Elshtain is helpful in suggesting that religion can become an ideology, which she describes as a "totalizing and closed system that discounts or dismisses whatever does not fit within it" (p. 16).

So Islamic fundamentalists don't just disagree with our beliefs or values, they hate us for who we are. And their counterparts, Christian fundamentalists, do the same: call Islam an evil religion and Muslims

infidels—not for anything they do but for who they are. Think of the tragedy and danger when those three ideologies, fundamentalisms collide: Islamic fundamentalism crying for the elimination of Israel; Jewish fundamentalism claiming all of the ancient Holy Land, including Palestine, for Israel; Christian fundamentalism strongly supporting right wing Israeli and American politicians because they believe Israel has to have it all for the Messiah to return—ironically forgetting to tell the part about the return of the Messiah being the end of the Jews.

Bruce Feiler's best seller *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* is an important and accessible exploration of the commonalities and differences between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity and the relationship of all three faiths to Abraham. Feiler asked Rabbi David Rosen what he thought the Abrahamic response to the terror of September 11 should be. Rosen's response was remarkable:

> If you ask me, it's a question of modesty. Why do religious people act the way they act? It's because of a lack of modesty. It's what happened in Jerusalem with Christian cults planning to blow up the Temple mount to make way for the Messiah. It's what happens in Israel with the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (by a Jewish fundamentalist) after he made peace with the Palestinians. . . . (And, of course 9/11.) Some people read the text and suffer from a lack of modesty.

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, has had the courage to suggest recently that what history now requires of all of us is something more than toleration. Tolerance is not enough. What we now need is a "covenant of hope" that makes space for one another. And then this, which is guaranteed to distress fundamentalists of each faith: "God's world is diverse. The paths to his presence are many. There are multiple universes of faith." (See Martin Marty, *Context*, 15 April 2003.)

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. In the aftermath of September 11, a lot of people recalled a poem W. H. Auden wrote about the day Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. He called it simply "September 1, 1939," and in it, he talked about the "expiration of clever hopes," and at the end he said, "We must love one another or die."

That sounds a lot like the gospel.

There's one line in there that always gets to me when I read or hear it: "I am the vine, you are the branches. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you," and then this: "Apart from me you can do nothing." The *Book of Common Worship* even suggests that during communion we say those words to one

another as we are serving the bread and the cup: “I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing at all.” And I always want to say, “Come on now. Nothing. I can’t do anything without you, Jesus. Surely you don’t mean that.”

Well, in my better moments, I conclude that he does mean that. That apart from his connecting you and me to the heart of the universe, the ultimate reality which is the God who is love, you and I really aren’t alive. And I conclude that people who do abide in love and therefore abide in God, whether they name it or not, are really alive. And I conclude, every day of my life, that I can’t do this on my own—in fact don’t come close to loving everyone God wants me to love, not to mention people I don’t much like. So, yes, I need help. I need the vine. I need the nutrients and energy and power of God’s love. I need God’s love to empower my own meager love.

And I know that for me and for every one of us there will come a day when everything else is failing and when we will need powerfully and urgently to know that at the center there is a loving heart, that God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

“Abide with Me,” the old hymn says. At the end of Cornelius Ryan’s *A Bridge Too Far*, a book about one of the very difficult and unsuccessful engagements of the Second World War in which the loss of life was huge and the mission ultimately unsuccessful, the mission has failed at a terrible cost in Allied casualties. A British division had been decimated, almost wiped out; the wounded and dying and soon-to-be captured soldiers are surrounded and waiting for the end—either surrender, death, or a humiliating and precarious retreat.

Their chaplain, struggled for something to say or do to convey something of God’s peace. All he could think of was to sing “Abide with Me.” At first the demoralized men just listened. Then they began to hum and sing softly themselves. Against the thunderous barrage, hundreds of wounded and dying men took up the words “When other helpers fail and comforts flee, God of the helpless, O abide with me.”

I am the vine; you are the branches.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Thanks be to God.